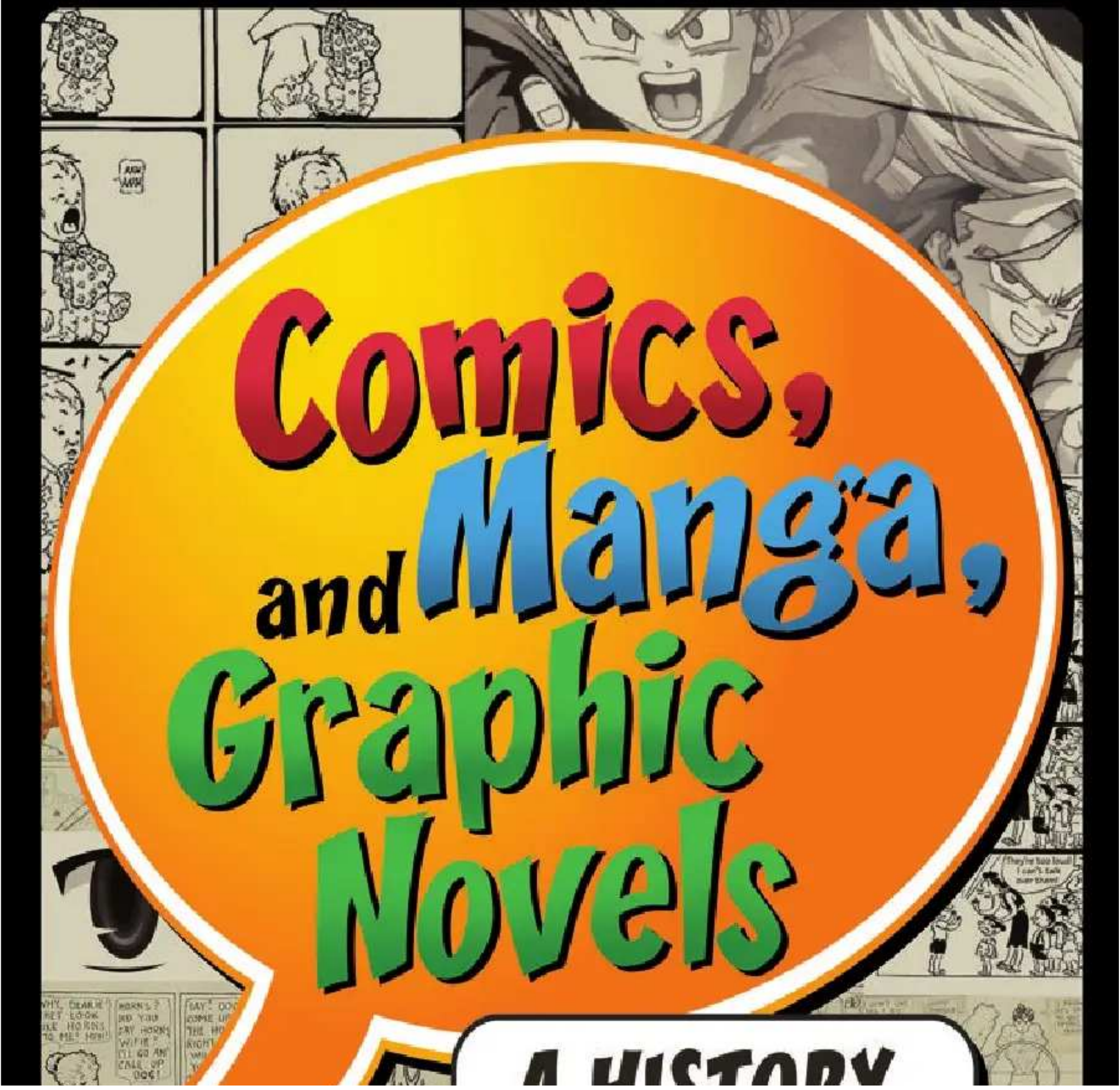

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Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels

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Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels

A History of Graphic Narratives

ROBERT S. PETERSEN

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Preface

This book reflects my circuitous arrival to the subject of comics by way of the study of narrative art and theater. I read comics when I was young, but I was never an avid collector and had largely lost interest in reading comics

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great many pioneering scholars besides Victor Mair who have contributed significantly to the understanding of narrative art and comics. Among them, I credit Vidya Dehejia for her scholarship on Buddhist narratives in India, David Kunzle for his extensive work on early popular prints in Europe, and John Lent on Asian comics. In undertaking this ambitious project, I was

very fortunate to have excellent colleagues who are expert in a number critical subjects. I thank Stephen Canfield for his insights into all things francophone, Janet Marquardt in medieval art, and Stephen Eskilson in contemporary art and graphic design, who were willing to discuss my work and give me valuable guidance along the way. I am especially indebted to Dr. Eskilson for his patient reading of the first draft that helped clear up some of my more indulgent digressions and convoluted arguments. Needless to say, the errors that remain are all of my own doing. I also owe a great deal of thanks to Glenn Hildt, the chair of the art department at Eastern Illinois University, not only for sharing his own knowledge of underground and independent comics but also for his enthusiastic support for my class on the history of graphic narratives, from which I have had many valuable opportunities to discuss and debate with my students the ideas contained in this book. To my students, I am eternally grateful for showing me new ways of thinking about graphic narratives and for asking hard questions, among them, what has this to do with comics?

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Introduction

“The future of comics is in the past.”

Art Spiegelman

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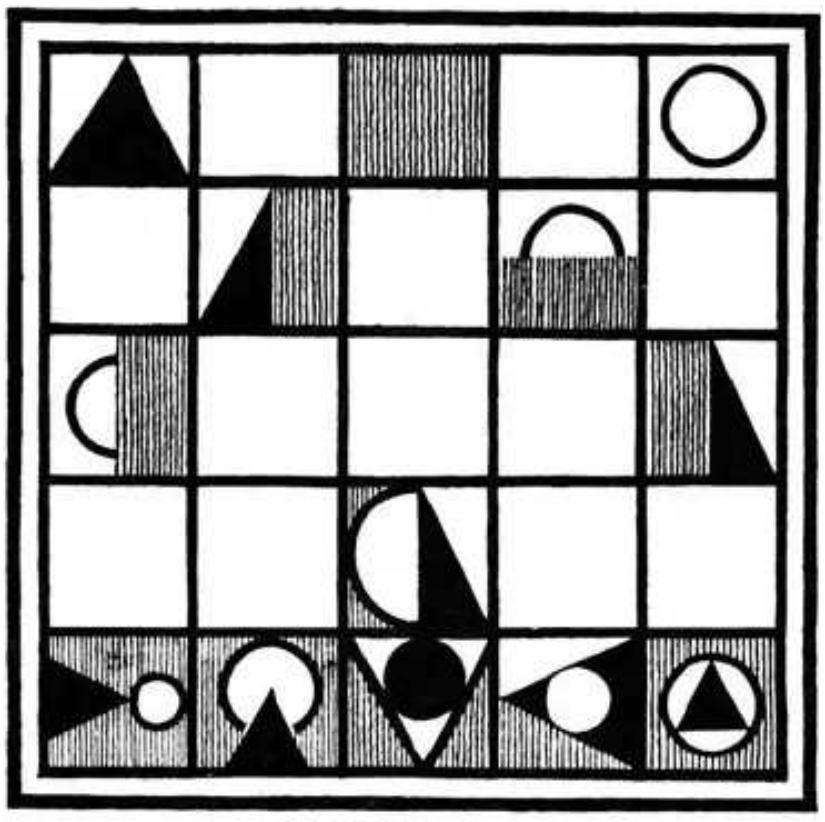
pictures are causally linked images, that one image represents a moment in time that leads to another moment in an unfolding chain of events.

Over the centuries, artists have found many creative ways to tell stories with pictures, but often the pictures remain coded, relying on conventions and symbols that could be understood only by the original audience long since gone. Before the advent of writing pictures of forgotten stories scratched on cave walls do not easily yield up their mysteries. Seeing a figure throw a spear at an animal, we may deduce the figure is hunting, but we



Lexical Key

may not know the reason for the hunt or if the hunt was successful because these aspects of the story occur before and after the actual moment being represented. Images do not easily tell stories because they are perceived more or less all at once, synchronically, whereas stories are naturally told or written diachronically, over time. Therefore, to understand a story from a single picture, it is necessary to have some inkling as to what the

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which is a story told using nonmoving images. This term also describes comic books and graphic novels, but not film and animation. It is critical to distinguish the artistic qualities of graphic narratives from animated cartoons because even when they share a common visual style, they use different visual codes to tell the story and are different in the way the audience experiences them. With graphic narratives, the pace of reading the story is more like reading a book than watching a movie or a television show, where the narrative pace is dictated by the medium. But unlike the reader of a book, the reader of a graphic narrative does not always read the story in a linear fashion. Furnival's *Semiotic Folk Poem*, for example, does not unfold

one picture at a time like words on a page; rather, by looking over the whole picture and seeing the relationships between the smaller individual pictures, with some empty and others filled with interlocking forms, the reader apprehends a sense of movement over time. From this example, it is clear that reading a graphic narrative involves distinctly different perceptual processes than do other genres of storytelling and looking at art.

Despite its long history and unique means of communication, the graphic narrative remains an elusive category between art and literature that has struggled to establish its own distinct terminology and theories about how it works. "Graphic narrative" is a relatively new expression first minted by David Kunzle,[1] but since picked up by many other scholars, among them Hillary L. Chute and Marianne DeKoven, as more content neutral than "comics" because it is not historically or culturally linked to a specific era or

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The Act of Reading Art

Wolfgang Kemp noted that "narratives—even narratives of beginnings—seldom come in isolation and are seldom original."[2] In this passage, Kemp is commenting on the way narrative is always situated between retellings and, like all language, is built upon shared structures for communication. Narrative fundamentally establishes a relationship between storyteller and audience, and for this reason, narratives are derivative in order to assure that all concerned understand each other.

Graphic narratives express ideas by transforming them into a story where the actions of characters become a way of describing experiences and sensations beyond one's own lived experience. Despite this common purpose across all storytelling forms, different means of communication are intrinsically linked to culturally formed modes of reading that convey different values and judgments. Lera Boroditsky has researched the linguistic structures of meaning in different cultures and how they change the way people perceive and recall phenomena. She observed that when people were given a set of pictures of a particular action, for example, a man growing old or a person eating a banana, they would invariably arrange the individual pictures into a narrative by placing them in the same direction they would read or write. For English speakers, this direction is left to right; for Hebrew speakers, this is

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and Result, Crime and Punishment."[4] Kunzle notes the similarity of this kind of narrative strategy to many folktales that encapsulate the dualites of right and wrong, good and evil. Morality, or even immorality, is not essential to graphic narrative action, but it tends to put the narrative into sharper focus and heighten the drama.

The rise of the graphic narrative in Europe parallels the rise in popular melodrama, and it is in this direction that we find some important similarities. Melodramas, like most graphic narratives, are concerned with "the surface of the world—the surfaces of manners, the signifiers of the text," writes Peter Brooks, who observes that the objective of such artistic activity is ultimately to use the visible world to make sense of itself. In other words,

> melodrama is about "recognition and clarification, how to be clear what the stakes are and what their representative signs mean, and how to face them."[5]

In a similar fashion, graphic narratives rely on representing things in a way that is predicated on our cognition of how we make sense of our known world. In this respect, the visual elements in a graphic narrative are like objects on stage: they are animated with potential signification, adopting meanings beyond what they may simply represent in the everyday world. One important way graphic narratives differ from theater is that the drawings that make up the story are not at all dependent on being real objects in real space and real time to establish the story; rather, the images are compiled in the reader's mind, and inferences are drawn from the similarities

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ever poorly and childishly drawn, possesses necessarily, by the mere fact of existing, some perfectly definite expression."[6] More recently, Scott McCloud has also commented on this phenomenon, pointing out that the human capacity to see faces in suggestive abstract forms is an outgrowth of our ability to project our self-image onto those forms. McCloud concludes that because these projections onto the form are still connected to our self-identity, they become evocative images that have a compelling power over us.[7]

Reading a graphic narrative, such as a modern comic, requires some translation of coded images into real experience; by and large, however, the images are remarkably transparent in their meaning and do not need instructions or a lexicon for their comprehension. This is one reason why McCloud refers to comics as the "invisible art," for readers easily accept the visual conventions with almost no need for explanation. Ernie Bushmiller's

long-lived comic strip *Nancy* is a good example of the essential conventions of comic strip narrative, which is so self-evident that it has been described as "easier to read than not read." Despite the economy of the information provided in the very simple drawing style, the *Nancy* strip has the studied grace of a classic joke with the setup (seeing the other kids getting squirted) and the payoff (the knowledge that Nancy is prepared for Sluggo's trick). The final event of Sluggo getting wet is self-evident because of the the way Bushmiller has set up the comic so that it does not even need to be shown for a reader to get the joke.

The most fundamental of all graphic narrative conventions is the fact that

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threat to Nancy, it reinforces the primary theme and the expectation that Nancy is next. The smaller panel size makes us take in the action more quickly and thus renders it less significant than the final panel, where we see once again Nancy in the dominant position at the end of the fence. This time, however, a hose connected to the dripping faucet is our first order of significance and directly leads to Nancy, who is now facing off against Sluggo. Sluggo repeats his cowboy patter and, because of the earlier evidence, now appears to be on the verge of squirting her. Nancy, however, is now in the dominant position to the left and is almost assuredly going to get him before her gets her. The laugh comes not from actually seeing the final blast of water but from recognizing its visceral potential.

Bushmiller can assume his English readers will cast their eyes from left to right, but he has gone further in composing the elements to enhance our reading experience and our understanding of the joke. These compositional strategies form visual connections between elements that are called "paths."[8]

Such paths often appear in all kinds of art and design. They may or may not convey a narrative, but graphic narratives are always dependent on paths to organize visual information into a meaningful sequence. Paths provide a means for the reader to sort the complex information of the composition into a meaningful hierarchy of relative importance. Artists use these strategies just as a magician uses sleight of hand to direct the eye of the viewer to create an illusion. An experienced craftsman such as Bushmiller can use paths to more economically tell the joke, confident that a reader will see just

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